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S E C R E T DAMASCUS 000107

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/12/2018
TAGS: PGOV, PTER, SY, LE
SUBJECT: HIZBALLAH'S IMAD MUGNIYAH KILLED BY CAR BOMB IN
DAMASCUS

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, reasons 1.5 b and d.

1. (SBU) Syria's tightly controlled press remained silent on reports of Imad Mugniyah's death in a car bomb that exploded near Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) headquarters in the neighborhood of Kafr Sousa at approximately 10:00 pm local February 12. According to contacts who were on the scene, SMI secured and cleared the area and kept other police services away. Tow trucks removed several vehicles within 45 minutes after the explosion which jarred surrounding buildings and could be felt at the American Ambassador's residence three miles away. Syrian officials reported the blast had been the result of a butane gas leak and that one unidentified person (later two) had been killed.

2. (C) Media and other contacts reported mid-morning February 13 that unknown assailants had launched a car bomb attack against notorious Hizballah military operative Imad Mugniyah. The story broke simultaneously on wire services

and Arab satellite television stations al Jazeera, al Arabyia, and al Manar. Western press was also reporting that the second victim was Hizballah MP al Hajj Hussein, although Hizballah denied this. As of COB local, Syrian authorities had yet to provide any further comment on the incident. (A Fox News affiliate told us MFA officials seemed "shocked" by reports of Mugniyah's death but offered no comment.)

3. (C) The most frequent theory suggested by media and diplomatic contacts was that Israel conducted the attack to embarrass Syria on the eve of a previously scheduled visit by Iranian FM Manuchehr Mottaki. Going to the other extreme, others were unwilling to rule out that Hizballah itself had conducted the assassination to neutralize Mugniyah's challenge to Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. One contact even suggested that Syria could have undertaken the operation as a sign of its desire to engage Israel and the West.

4. (S) Saudi XXXXXXXXXXXX (protect) told us Mugniyah's presence in Damascus might have been related to a possible February 13 meeting in Damascus among Lebanese March 8 MPs with SARG officials. He also noted that SMI Director Assaf Shawkat's offices were close to where the explosion occurred, and Mugniyah could have been going to or coming from the meeting. British and Egyptian Embassy sources suggested Iranian FM Mottaki planned to meet with Hizballah and March 8 representatives during his February 13-14 visit to Damascus as a counter to March 14's planned public demonstration to mark the third anniversary of the February 14 assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri.

5. (C) Comment: This apparent targeted assassination of one of Hizballah's most notorious operatives coincides with a busy week of official visits meant to refute suggestions that Syria's Lebanon policy is resulting in a new period of Western and Arab diplomatic isolation. Syria's ongoing silence regarding the attack is a characteristic regime response, most recently observed (and still in effect) after Israel's September 6 air strike near Deir az-Zur. This silence likely reflects a deep sense of regime embarrassment from the acknowledged assassination of a wanted-terrorist whose presence in Syria it denied for years. The event also impacts Syrian-Iranian-Hizballah cooperation on the eve of FM Mottaki's visit likely meant to bolster Syria's position in the face of escalating March 14 rhetoric and growing Western impatience with Syria's Lebanon policy.

CORBIN

=====CABLE ENDS=====